



NATIONAL WILDFOWL COUNTS

PINK-FOOTED AND GREYLAG GEESE IN BRITAIN, NOVEMBER 1987
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Introduction

The 28th annual autumn census of Pink-footed and Greylag Geese in Britain took place over the weekend of 14th/15th November 1987. Following an excellent breeding season in Iceland a record total of 172,000 Pinkfeet were found, but only 105,000 Greylags.

Weather and conditions

On the 14th conditions were generally clear, with moderate, variable winds and little rain, but for the dawn count on the 15th visibility was poor in many areas, with widespread rain. Winds were generally southerly, and strong in south-west Scotland. Survey work continued in parts of East Central Scotland over the following week in generally excellent conditions (MAD).

Another very wet summer and autumn led to a late harvest, and plentiful unploughed stubble with abundant spilt grain.

PINKFEET

In addition to the 136,000 counted in the November 1986 census (Table 1) analysis of the regular monthly count data for that month revealed a further 2,000 birds missed by the census. Following a highly successful breeding season in 1987 there has been another substantial increase in the autumn totals. The proportion of young in the November flocks varied widely between regions, with 27% in eastern Scotland (where the bulk of the birds occur and 13,000 were aged), 17% in Lancashire and 15% in Norfolk (the latter two samples being 2,000); the overall percentage is considered to be 25.6%.

East Central Scotland held a much larger share of the total than normal (see Table 2), at the expense of most other areas. The main factor was a count of 35,000 at Montrose Basin, Angus. Since a Local Nature Reserve was established there in 1981 the numbers of Pinkfeet have increased markedly, but this count was still a surprise! Counts of 10-11,000 were made at the Loch of Strathbeg (Grampian), Dupplin Loch (Tayside), Carsebreck (Tayside), Aberlady Bay (Lothian) and Westwater Reservoir (Borders). In October there were 33,000 in the Lothian/Tweeddale area, including 20,000 at Westwater, which has taken over as "the" roost in the area from Gladhouse Reservoir, which is now heavily disturbed.

Table 1. Nos of Pinkfeet and Greylags counted in Britain, November 1985-1987

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	Nov 1985	Nov 1986	Nov 1987	Nov 1985	Nov 1986	Nov 1987
Orkney	-	-	-	630	380	1300
Highland						
Caithness	-	-	-	3330	5880	3340
Sutherland/Wester Ross	-	-	-	110	-	-
Easter Ross	-	20	30	5370	6360	12400
Inverness	-	-	-	80	5890	11000
Badenoch & Strathspey	-	-	-	510	1240	1720
Grampian						
Moray	-	-	-	6140	8000	9950
Banff & Buchan	12100	15510	11500	4620	6600	7350
Gordon	13600	9630	8840	9440	6160	8410
Kincardine & Dee	-	-	-	15000	8200	8100
Tayside						
Angus	15300	21800	53730	4140	4270	6280
Perth & Kinross	15230	24800	31720	34390	24530	13150
Central	1230	1190	-	1030	640	260
Fife	5000	5500	6050	1000	2050	100
Lothian						
West	10	20	140	960	860	700
Mid	4600	6680	4000	130	700	740
East	10400	5410	11350	510	1220	30
Borders						
Tweeddale	10590	16300	10430	10	120	110
Roxburgh	8700	4140	4000	2100	4450	470
Berwickshire	4430	5530	5000	1080	1600	3080
Strathclyde						
Argyll & Bute	-	-	-	4570	2520	3030
Cunningham	-	-	-	-	130	190
Dunbarton	-	-	-	1000	500	350
Strathkelvin	-	-	-	300	870	650
Lanark	780	410	3490	-	290	690
Kyle & Carrick	-	-	-	190	160	200
Dumfries & Galloway						
Wigtown	-	-	-	2940	3620	2160
Stewartry	-	-	50	1350	580	1250
Nithsdale	6830	80	1800	450	240	1150
Cumbria	-	55	200	1090	1000	810
Lancashire	15000	16560	16460	-	-	-
Northumberland	-	3	32	4200	2940	5820
Humberside	250	-	70	-	-	-
Lincolnshire	30	120	17	-	-	-
Norfolk	3850	2000	3000	-	-	-
TOTALS	128000	135720	<u>171980</u>	64000	107000	<u>104790</u>

GREYLAG

A further 6,000 were reported in the monthly counts in addition to the 102,000 found in the November 1986 census (Table 1). Despite an overall estimate of 33% young in the autumn flocks (based on a sample of 8,000 birds from a wide area) the November 1987 count total was only 105,000. Some regular resorts were unrecorded, and it is possible that some 5-10,000 were missed, but this is still a remarkably low return. Taking only those sites counted in both 1986 and 1987 (encompassing c.90,000 birds), the total shows virtually no change between seasons.

A similar result occurred in 1982, when despite the presence of 30% young in the autumn flocks the total count showed a slight fall. A number of possible factors were considered to have contributed then: mortality in the hard weather of the previous winter, abnormal autumn distribution due to food shortages, poor weather for the November count and movements during the census weekend. The cold spell of January 1987 occurred during the shooting season, so the birds may have been under greater than normal pressure before the ban came into force. There is no evidence that the hard weather of the 1984-85 and 85-86 winters resulted in exceptional mortality, however, although in 1985-86 it did occur largely after the end of the shooting season. The abundance of food may have caused birds to be more widespread than normal this autumn, resulting in under-counting. Similarly, Greylags often roost on small areas of flood, which in this very wet season must have been more than usually common. Analyses are currently in progress on the complete run of censuses which it is hoped will shed more light on the level of mortality and its relationship to the autumn numbers. Meanwhile we can only assume that this low return was largely a result of undercounting, due to greater than usual dispersal.

The largest concentration was around the northern firths, north of Inverness, where feeding conditions were particularly favourable.

Table 2. *Regional distribution of Pinkfeet and Greylags counted in November 1985-1987, expressed as percentages of total*

	PINKFEET			GREYLAGS		
	Nov 1985	Nov 1986	Nov 1987	Nov 1985	Nov 1986	Nov 1987
North Scotland	20.2	18.6	11.8	42.4	47.8	60.7
East Central Scotland	28.7	39.3	53.2	38.0	30.9	18.9
South-east Scotland	30.2	28.1	20.3	4.5	8.8	4.9
South-west Scotland	5.9	0.4	3.2	11.1	9.7	10.0
North England	11.7	12.2	9.6	3.9	2.9	5.6
East England	3.2	1.6	1.8	-	-	-

Figures are percentages of total count.

Notices

Very many thanks for the superb response to the request for information on the character of your count areas and their usage by geese. The data will make a major contribution to our Wetland Register, and help with any questions arising on specific sites. You should have received a copy of the *Wildfowl and Wader Counts* report for 1986-87. If not, please let me know.

I hope the March 1988 count went well; please send in the results immediately and let me know of any problems or gaps which you are aware of so that we can help fill them in April. Please also remember to record as much information as you can on the numbers and movements of geese AFTER the April count.

A further 157 Pinkfeet have been caught at Martin Mere in 1987-88 and fitted with white plastic rings on the RIGHT leg, making a total of 320 so marked since the current programme began. In addition, 43 were ringed during a successful expedition to Iceland in the summer of 1987; these were fitted with white rings on the LEFT leg. Fifty-seven birds have been resighted so far, including one seen at Martin Mere in December 1987 and subsequently in north Norfolk in February 1988. Please let us know if you have any sightings or would like further information.

A paper describing the numbers and distribution of feral Greylags will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Bird Study*. This population, largely excluded from the regular censuses, is estimated at 13-14,000 in Britain and Northern Ireland. The only area where there is significant overlap between the feral and wintering populations, and it is not possible to separate them in the regular counts, is Galloway. A survey of the area is therefore being arranged this summer.

Following the Local Public Enquiry into the appeal by an owner of the *Loch of Strathbeg* against a Nature Conservation Order preventing shooting on the islands and peninsula at the top of the loch, the site of one of the largest goose roosts in Britain, a new Order was issued by the Secretary of State for Scotland in August 1987. This prohibits wildfowling in the most sensitive area on more than six days, between an hour and half before sunset and an hour and a half after sunrise, and with more than four guns. The goose roost is therefore effectively protected.

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